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ABSTRACT

This paper is conceived as an extended reflection on what has passed for a materialist epistemology--which may be one way to understand cultural work--in English Studies. Rather than providing any final answers to the questions of what the praxis says about the theory, the paper first examines the origin of the humanistic literary text and then examines one of composition's responses to that origin. Finally, it suggests some questions that might govern composition's future in the next millennium. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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Re-Visualizing the Instruction of Composition: Students, Authors, and the Logics of Writing Instruction.

by Todd M. English

1999

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This paper is less of an argument than it is an extended reflection on what has passed for a materialist epistemology—which may be one way to understand cultural work—in English Studies. Rather than providing any final answers to the questions of what our praxis says about our theory, I examine the origin of the humanistic literary text, and then examine one of composition's responses to that origin. Finally, I suggest some questions that might govern composition's future in the next millennium.

Composition's most oft-told originary narrative goes something like this: the need for composition instruction arose as the switch from a classically-based system of post-secondary education ended in the mid-nineteenth century. As enrollment in colleges and universities continued to grow, new student enrollees clearly lacked the preparation of the few students who attended the "old," classically-based university. Rather than trying to cram Greek and Latin down the throats of these "other" students, the university turned to belletristic rhetoric as its new venue for discursive normativization. Yet, with mounting horror and surprise, universities discovered that these new students were completely ill-equipped to produce written discourse in English that could reflect the demands of even this "watered down," native-language oriented curriculum. Consequently, Harvard took a dual approach in order to solve the problem:

1) In what would become and remain a perpetual litany of complaint, it attacked the secondary schools for not attending to students' mastery of their own written language. As part of this solution, Harvard produced a "book list" and a written exam so that the University could more easily control the secondary curriculum.
2) Harvard, until such time as secondary schools could "toe the line" and produce decent—and I use that term advisedly—writers, would institute a remedial course, English A. This

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course, not imagined in its inception to be a permanent part of the curriculum, began freshman composition.

From here, departments of English began yet another moaning litany of complaint about the course: different vesicle—students are ill-prepared, students are dirty, students need to be cleaned up, et., etc., etc.,--same response: someone is not doing his/her/its job—*you pick the pronoun.* Meanwhile, as English departments undertook the dirty work of tidying ill-prepared students' prose, the department also began it journey to power and prominence as the texts of belletristic rhetoric—also known as literature—themselves became the venerable objects of investigation.

As John Guillory articulates this journey, "...the revaluation of vernacular works in English, as the equivalent of the Greek and Roman classics, provided the emergent bourgeoisie with a means of emulating the cultural capital of the aristocratic and clerical estates." A later project, however—the connected but differently inflected institution of an Arnoldian literary sensibility-- "...in the largest possible constituency was on the contrary intended to have the social function of neutralizing the very political ideologies which set the classes in opposition to one another" (136). With T.S. Eliot, and the growing dominance of the New Criticism, belletristic rhetoric became metaphorically and logically linked to salvation history—i.e., literary texts, particularly dense short poems!--offered the nation and culture an assurance of its own superiority and elect status.

Composition's role in this new scheme of things remained largely unchanged: its teachers were to teach students the surface conventions of Standard English, and, armed with increasingly popular handbooks, sternly admonish students to "clean up their acts." If literary works led to salvation, then composition courses were a necessary evil: university written exams served as the sacrament of first confession, first-year composition as the mandated penance, and literary study as a quasi-liturgical Holy Communion with the Great Author.

As I prepared to write this paper, I went to the library, and pleased with my own cleverness, did some etymological research on the word "Author." After digging through several etymological dictionaries, and actually copying those definitions down—the books were so old and large that xeroxing simply didn't work—I had a niggling suspicion that someone had already done this work far more effectively than I had. Sure enough, I went home, opened up Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic, and discovered Edward Said's meditation on "author" on page five. So, for what follows, I'll rely on his respectability with one addition of my own.

"Author," from the Latin "auctore," itself derived from the verb *augure* implies both a sense of origin, as in someone who begins or begats, and a sense of ownership, as in one who possesses. As Said continues, however, authoring also implies an "increase over what had been there before," and, curiously, "that the individual wielding this power controls its issue and what is derived therefrom;" and, finally, "that authority maintains the continuity of its course." Surprisingly, Said—or Gilbert and Gubar—neglect another meaning of Author, one that fits very tidily into the grand narrative of literary salvation: Author also meant Creator, as in the "Author of Life."

Given the sheer weight of this term, the valorization of the Author with a capital A seems easily understood. If we assign, to certain literary figures and certain literary texts, a peculiar originary and foundational title and status, then the "Author" can become a kind of quasi-mystical being whose hierarchical, hieratic priests scribble footnotes, endnotes, and interpretations for deposit in the library of sacred authorial commentary. He—i.e. the author—becomes the object of a cult of veneration. *[Note: I used the masculine pronoun advisedly—after all, most Authors were/are "hes;" it really helped if the Maryanne Evanses pretended to be George Eliots as well!]* The idea of the "Author" further served a unifying function; if literary scholars could invoke this quasi-mystical being, incarnated in many different [*mostly male*] bodies across the ages, the epistemological status of English Studies could be deferred as self-evident. We study, and teach, those [mostly] men who are the venerable saints. At the highest level of abstraction, gender didn't really mater much any way; Sharon Crowley quotes Natalie Calderwood's 1957 "Composition and Literature" article:

> ...the student who reads literary texts makes an acquaintance with ideas, concepts, feelings, experience which are *universal and, as of now, permanent truths."* (Calderwood, qtd. in Crowley 107; emphasis mine).

As the field progressed, it even—not accidentally, I imagine—produced its own canon—after all, what's a religion without its sacred texts?

Of course, I'm exaggerating here—pushing the religious conceit further than it should perhaps be pushed. However, the authorial status of certain finished texts does indeed raise significant problems for the teaching of composition. If hyperliterate, "finished" texts are so completely fetishized as to be quasi-sacred, then what happens to the production texts by those who

will rarely become "author-saints," and furthermore have no wish or desire to do so? Donald Stewart quotes the 1902 *Proceedings of the MLA*—from the pedagogical section to boot:

> To teach "authorship" to the ordinary mortal is a mere waste of time upon the impossible. Going farther, I would say that we can't teach "authorship," even to the gifted mortal. We can teach him and his less favored brother how to outline his subject, how to frame respectable sentences and paragraphs. *There we must stop.* (Stewart 744; emphasis *sic*).

There we have it, articulated very early in the MLA's history: Authorship is a mysterious and immortal thing; the rest of us must be content with outlines, clear paragraphs and decent sentences.

Clearly, the *Proceedings*' commentary poses something of a dilemma for composition teachers. If authors are to be celebrated for their immortal status, then the rest of us must rest content with adequate paragraphs, sentences, and organization. Thus, Gerald Graff can write an institutional history that barely mentions composition, even though, as numerous composition scholars have noted, he acknowledges that "...without that enterprise [composition] literature could never have achieved its central status, and none of the ideas i discuss would matter very much" (Graff 2). Robert Scholes confronts the literature/composition dichotomy with more honesty; he acknowledges that composition was often at the bottom of the hierarchy. However, he cautions us against simply reversing the terms with this dire warning" "The demand for more composition courses operates within a larger economic system that privileges literature and its interpreters" (Scholes 6). While John Guillory and others fear that literary privilege won't survive much longer, Scholes' schemata may still adequately describe the material reality of composition instruction in many, if not most, universities—at least at *this* writing.

Yet, sometime within the last half-century or so, something happened to composition. Whether we date the field's legitimization from the formation of this conference in the late 1940s, or the publication of early 1960s research monographs, or the publication of Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, or whatever other relatively arbitrary date we choose as inaugural, composition has slowly shifted its status within English Studies. A significant part of this shift involved our rejection of the Spirit of the Great Author as a model and guide for our teaching practice, and a focused quest to replace that author. Taxonomic articles became increasingly frequent, and calls for, in John Gage's words, "An Adequate Epistemology," increasingly urgent.

If composition's traditional purpose of policing student prose, while regarded as the unfortunate dirty work of the university, could not justify increasing professionalization for the field, then some such justification needed to be found. Consequently, we tried myriad approaches—reviving classical rhetoric, borrowing empirical research methods from the social sciences, and even, in William Lutz's words, making our classrooms "happening"—to legitimize our well-established practice as a "true" discipline. Although seismic cultural shifts, evidenced in the increasingly diverse body of students admitted to institution of higher education, demanded more attention to student writing, such market place reasoning did not provide an adequate intellectual warrant for the field's home community, the university.

Even as literary studies traditionally articulated its own *raison d'être* by invoking the Great Author Spirit rather than by formulating a systematic epistemology, that authorial spirit has informed the very material and cultural conditions for the work of composition. Given our historical location in English departments, there is a certain inevitability to seeing our work in contrast to, and in relationship to, the heavily venerated texts of great men. Bruce Horner, in "Students, Authorship, and the Work of Composition" argues that composition has, by and large, simply evaded the material challenges raised by a binary opposition between student and author. Consequently, he asks us to acknowledge that binary even as we strive to combat its effects. However, Horner's challenge, I think, overlooks something very important to our articulation of our own disciplinarity: composition has not so much escaped the author/student binary as it has substituted the student for the author in the privileged position. Imagine, if you will, a Venn diagram: the circle is drawn, and titled: *Writing in English Studies*. The traditional, humanistic view of the Great Author forms most of the circle. All other are simply labeled: *Non-Great Author*. In what follows, I demonstrate ways that composition's pedagogical revolution simply replaces the "Great Author" part of the diagram with another ter .

Maxine Hairston, in her famous "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing" posits process theory as composition's pedagogical revolution. For Hairston, this revolution was buttressed by the presence, in her words, of "...specialists who are doing controlled and directed research on writers' composing processes" (23). The revolution can be summed up rather simply in a maxim: teach the process rather than the product. However, this maxim—unwittingly, I think—replicates the structure and the Spirit of the Great Author. If the spirit of the Great Author infused humanistic apologetics for the value of

belletristic rhetoric, then the Spirit of the Student infused the process pedagogy movement. For a moment, let's re-visit Donald Murray's eight point program for the process revolution [*as an aside, Hairston credits Murray with the "Teach process not product" maxim*]:

1) The text of the writing course is student writing
2) Students find their own subjects and use their own language
3) Students write as many drafts as are necessary to discover what there is to say
4) Students write in any form that is appropriate, since "...the process which produces creative and functional writing is the same"
5) "Mechanics come last"
6) Student writers must have enough time for the process to occur
7) Individual student papers are not graded
8) "Since student writers, as individuals, differ from one another, their writing processes may differ, to; and so there are no rules, no absolutes, just alternatives" (Murray, qtd. in Crowley 188).

Murray's schemata served, I think, as something like a manifesto: like all manifestos, it ran the risk of becoming more of a credal statement that it did as an actual epistemology. In fact Murray's statement *is* structured like a creed: "I/We believe" is replaced by "students:"*...you fill in the blank*. In the late eighties and early nineties, as the ultimate vacuity of the process movement became increasingly apparent, Maxine Hairston, in unprecedented and overwhelmingly public statements, overtly attacked Linda Brodkey's proposed revision of a composition syllabus at UTA Austin. Interestingly, in at least one of these attacks, Hairston uses credal language to position her responses. Rather than relying on the significant amount of theoretical and empirical research clearly at her disposal, Hairston, in an opinion piece for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, offered the following comments:

> As a writing specialist and teacher for 20 years and as a former president of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, *I believe* required college writing courses should teach students to:

- Use writing as a tool for discovering and organizing knowledge
- Become critical thinkers by learning to articulate their ideas in writing and then refine those ideas through revision
- Become confident writers who use logic and rhetoric to communicate their thoughts clearly (Hairston 1991; emphasis mine).

I don't think that Hairston's commentary did any service for the filed of Composition Studies. If an eminent scholar simply abandons even the *pretense* of scholarly knowledge in her public attacks on another scholar, any epistemological basis for that knowledge necessarily disappears into a re-articulation of what Stephen North terms "lore." As Hairston's argument continues, she frames her attack on Brodkey in terms that use the student-spirit as the justification for her attack: speaking of the goals for a student writing course, Hairston claims that

> "We do not believe" [*note the pronoun shift*] required writing courses built around politically charged social issues can achieve the goals I've outlined for students learning to write. One reason is that we know students develop best as writers when they are allowed to write on something they care about. Having them write about other people's ideas doesn't work so well" (Hairston 1991 B3).

As Hairston continues, she frets that students won't write what they really think in these politically charged courses because they're afraid for grades—if the instructor has an opinion, then students necessarily will parrot that opinion lest instructors punish disagreeable students who disagree.

Let's put aside Hairston's extraordinarily insulting view of composition teachers—if students disagree with our opinions, that disagreement will necessarily be reflected in our grades! Remember the earlier maxims for justifying humanistic study of literary texts? "To teach authorship to the ordinary mortal is a mere waste of time upon the impossible?" And, "the student who reads literary texts makes an acquaintance with ideas, concepts, feeling, experiences which are universal and, as of now, permanent truths?" Hairston's equally questionable maxims, I think, served the same function in composition's history as humanistic authority did in literary texts. Some students may find writing an excellent way to discover and organize knowledge; others may find more visually oriented approaches more effective. Some students may indeed feel threatened by teachers' opinions; some students may relish the challenge offered by arguing with those

teachers. For Hairston, though, the students of composition looks something like that sexless, raceless, classless, and powerless student subject that Sharon Crowley, Susan Miller and Richard Ohmann have all brought to our attention. Much like the Spirit of the Great Author, the student must occupy more of a position than be an embodied person. Moreover, this student must be—in what are Susan Miller's words—infantilized—protected against the evil politically- correct literary theory-wielding teacher who challenge everything "we believe" about teaching writing.

Clearly, Hairston's claims about the process movement haven't been enough to quell discussion and produce fundamental agreement about the nature of composition studies, and what our true job of work might be. Equally as clear, however, is the fact that process pedagogy's impoverished sense of the "Spirit of the Student' can no more sustain a materialist epistemology than can that of the "Great Author." If we posit a student as unsituated as the spirit of the great author, then we are indeed left with little that is material, and even less that is epistemology.

John Guillory—perhaps a hostile witness--harshly articulates what he sees as composition's primary duty—teaching students to write "acceptable prose."

> The present urgent expansion of composition in the university undoubtedly exposes a failure to install the standard vernacular at lower levels of the education system, or the return of what appears to be a condition of dialectical multiplicity (actually a multiplicity of class, racial, and ethnic sociolects.) (Guillory 79).

Certainly, the vacuous student of process pedagogy needs that installation! Before we dismiss Guillory's argument out of hand, though, we need to, at least momentarily, consider its challenges.

In Guillroy's argument, the old literary syllabus was charted with providing cultural capital, a charge that proved to be an impossible task: on the one hand, the old literary syllabus sought to normativize discourse into a single "national' language. On the other hand, cultural capital, but the very nature of its circulation, demanded unequal distribution. For Guillory, composition has taken the literary syllabus' place—*and I quote*—"...the new institutional significance of composition marks the appearance of a new social function for the university, the task of providing the future technobureaucratic elite with precisely and only the linguistic competence necessary for the performance of its specialized function" (264).

It is not my intention to argue that a course or two in composition can single-handedly radically affect students' subjectivity. The current demise of theory, I think, might be a symptom

of how "theory hope" for immediate classroom change obscured the very real contributions that theory has and should continue to make to composition studies. If the spirit of the student is as dead as the spirt of the great author, then we can longer rely on quasi-liturgical maxims and invocations to provide an adequate epistemology for what we do. Briefly, I'd like to consider how composition's new prominence offers new opportunities for articulating a materialist epistemology.

As ties between the university and corporate world become increasingly visible, and as the corporate world speaks of asserting some control over the training and education of its future employees, those of us who teach writing have a ready-made justification for our evolving prominence. We can—and should—make immediate and programmatic arguments for composition's utility. Those arguments should, in turn, be the first part of a larger strategy for articulating a materialist epistemology.

As a first step, however, we need to articulate how the ritualized gestures of the classroom, even more than perceived content—or lack thereof—form what kind of arguments may be made, and what kinds of knowledge may be created, distributed, or obscured. In other words, we need to interrogate our classroom praxis beyond the syllabus in order to examine how the classroom itself might both replicate the world of work, and combat that word's over-arching presence. Specifically, we need to question the habit of deferral: when, in classroom practice, we tell students that "you will need to do *this*—whatever it is--in other classrooms or when you have job, what kind of knowledge do we thereby construct? What epistemological framework governs this very material and immediate habit?

As a second step, we need to interrogate our students' future and/or present workplaces with questions that arise from classroom practice. In other words, in what ways might knowledge making and knowledge distribution in the workplace be informed by our classroom practice? If Guillory is indeed correct and we will be training the new elite, then our primary challenge may be not only to prepare our students for the technocratic world, but to use the material practices of classrooms to interrogate the material practices of workplaces. Do open classrooms, nurturing classrooms, confrontational classrooms, etc., have as much to teach workplaces as workplaces aim to inform those classroom?

In other words, perhaps we need to acknowledge the accuracy of Guillory's accusation: we will indeed prepare student for life in a highly technologized, bureaucratic world. At the same

time, however, we need to challenge the workplace with the classroom. In taking on this dual task, the structures and precepts of a truly "materialist" epistemology might emerge for the work of composition.

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